

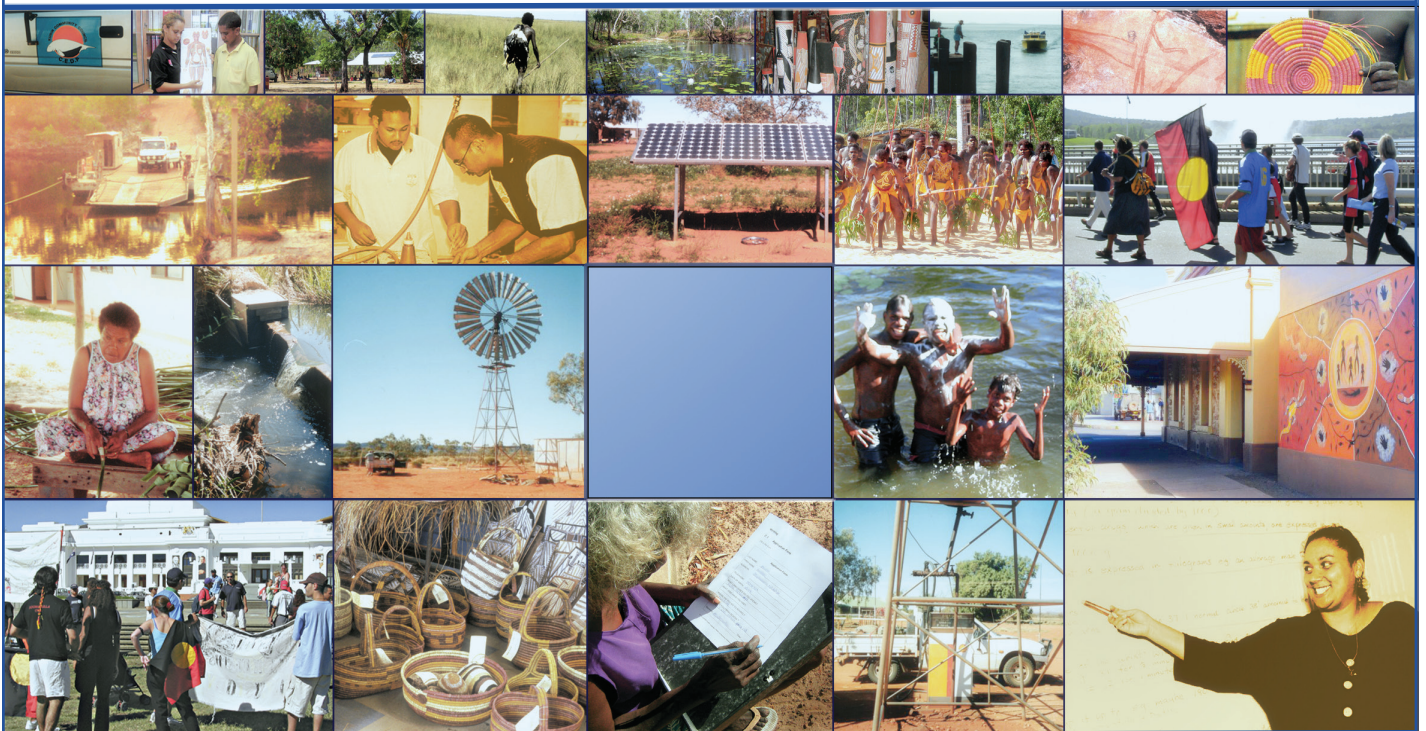
CENTRE FOR ABORIGINAL ECONOMIC
POLICY RESEARCH



The Draft Indigenous Economic Development Strategy: A Critical Response

J.C. Altman

CAEPR Topical Issue No. 3/2011



ANU COLLEGE OF ARTS & SOCIAL SCIENCES

The draft Indigenous Economic Development Strategy: A critical response

A version of this Topical Issue was provided as a submission to the Australian Government's Indigenous Economic Development Strategy Draft for Consultation.

Jon Altman

ARC Australian Professorial Fellow, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research,
The Australian National University, Canberra; e-mail: Jon.altman@anu.edu.au

OPENING REMARKS

This Topical Issue is adapted from a submission in response to the Australian government's [Indigenous Economic Development Strategy Draft for Consultation](#)¹ (henceforth the [Draft Strategy](#)). The need for a policy framework to enable Indigenous economic development is of critical importance in addressing the marginalized situation of many Indigenous people in Australian society. And so it is very appropriate that the incoming Rudd government committed to the formation of a new Indigenous Economic Development Strategy. This is an area of Indigenous affairs policy that has been especially challenging in the past. While I make clear at the outset that I am not a supporter of the currently dominant 'narrative of failure', there have been areas of exceptional economic development performance in the past and such success needs to be recognised, supported and replicated—which is not to deny there has also been failure. Nevertheless, there is currently a national mood to improve the marginal economic situation of many Indigenous Australians captured by the evocative idea 'Closing the Gap' and so it is timely that the issue of Indigenous economic development is rigorously addressed.

It might help if I preface my submission with some biographical information. I have worked as an academic economist and then anthropologist of development since 1977 focusing much of my research on Indigenous economic development issues. My geographic focus has been principally regional and remote Australia where the addressing of Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage is most amenable to the use of a development framework as generally understood in the international literature. However, I am no armchair academic. From 1990–2010 I ran the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) that I had established at the Australian National University to advise both the Australian government and many other stakeholders on Indigenous economic policy issues. Over the years, I have participated in many government inquiries into issues associated with development. Of most direct relevance to this submission, in 1985 I advised the Miller Committee that comprehensively inquired into Aboriginal employment and training programs; and in 2004 I assisted Power and Associates engaged by the Ministerial Council on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs develop an Indigenous Economic Development Strategy.

1. Available at <http://resources.fahcsia.gov.au/IEDS/ieds_default.htm>, viewed 25 November 2010.

My submission takes the form of commentary on key elements of the Draft Strategy that I summarise under the following seven sub-headings:

1. The contested notion 'economic development'
2. Economic hybridity and interculturality
3. Targeting development assistance
4. Recent policy history
5. Structural politico-economic factors
6. The proper role of the state
7. Policy-making processes

I conclude each section with one recommendation and end with an overarching recommendation for an approach to build on the Draft Strategy to make it more practically focused on the economic and social contexts of many Indigenous Australian communities. I take this approach because I am concerned that the proposed Strategy could perpetuate dependence, the unintended consequence of the Australian government's approach to economic development to date, rather than livelihood improvement, empowerment and reduced dependence as is intended. I make my final recommendation for a further parliamentary inquiry based on a more consultative approach.

I would like to emphasise that this submission reflects my views alone.

INTRODUCTION

The Draft Strategy was released by the Rudd government in May 2010 to fulfil a policy commitment in this important area made during the 2007 election campaign. Initially public submissions were requested by 1 November 2010 and then by 17 December 2010 owing to the change in leadership and August 2010 election. Presumably the Draft Strategy will be finalised during the life of the Gillard government.

The Draft Strategy is brief, totalling just over 20 pages. It consists of a foreword by then Ministers Macklin, Gillard and Arbib, some guiding principles summarised in a 'building blocks' figure, a context statement that identifies Indigenous socioeconomic deficits compared to all other Australians using official statistics, a brief paragraph outlining some unique areas of Indigenous competitive advantage, and a commitment to ongoing engagement with Indigenous Australians, the private sector and governments on strategy implementation (although it is unclear how this will be achieved). The Draft Strategy then focuses on five areas identified as strategic priorities—education and individual capabilities; jobs; business and entrepreneurship; financial security and independence; and strengthening foundations. In this main section reasons are given for the importance of these priorities and in each a set of priorities referred to as either 'the' or 'our' priorities is listed, reflecting the priorities of the Australian government. These priorities are couched in terms of the Draft Strategy's overarching aim 'to increase the wellbeing of Indigenous Australians by supporting greater economic participation and self reliance' (p.1). The Draft Strategy ends by noting that progress in its implementation will be reported to Parliament in the Prime Minister's annual Closing the Gap speech.

The Draft Strategy is accompanied by an [Indigenous Economic Development Action Plan 2010–2012](#),² which summarises action to date on each of the five key strategic areas and planned actions over the next two years. The existence of this Action Plan is a little surprising because while it is stated that it will be further developed after 2012 (and presumably when the Draft Strategy is revised on the basis of submissions), it is likely that path dependency will see a degree of reluctance to adaptively amend existing programs. I have more to say on policy-making processes below.

1. THE CONTESTED NOTION 'ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT'

The Draft Strategy opens with a broad definition of Indigenous economic development: it is about increasing the economic wellbeing of Indigenous Australians and improving their overall quality of life. Such a broad definition is reasonably incontestable, especially if Indigenous Australians are afforded opportunity to define what they consider to be wellbeing and quality of life. Unfortunately in the next sentence, this definition is far more limited: 'It goes beyond the Closing the Gap targets in life expectancy, health, education and employment by encouraging career development, business and home ownership, building individual and family prosperity and making the most of existing assets' (p.1). And then it is noted that actions taken to support economic development need to take into account the diversity of Indigenous circumstances, where people live, demography, market linkage, cultural, family and community connection and responsibilities and economic and social aspirations. These various definitions indicate that the Draft Strategy is somewhat conflicted: on one hand there is a desire to support the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) Closing the Gap targets; on the other, there is recognition that economic development cannot just be imposed from above and that it needs to connect with the aspirations, norms and ways of being of the to-be-developed subjects.

COAG:
Council of
Australian
Governments

2. Available at <http://resources.fahcsia.gov.au/IEDS/act_default.htm>.

I make just three brief points here.

First, Edelman and Haugerud (2005) note in the introduction to the book *The Anthropology of Development and Globalization* that development is an unstable term that is highly ambiguous. It connotes improvement in wellbeing, living standards and opportunities, but also refers to historical processes of commodification, industrialisation, modernisation and globalisation. They also suggest that development is a legitimising strategy for states, and note that those who are influenced by Foucault's notion of power question the desirability of development because it has the propensity to trap the poor in poverty, to reproduce existing politico-economic inequality. Economist Joseph Stiglitz made a similar critique of the role played by power in influencing the nature of economic development in *Globalisation and Its Discontents* (2003).

Second, in the Draft Strategy, there is a degree of mismatch between the notion of economic development used in the Foreword (by politicians) and that used in the Introduction (by bureaucrats). In the Ministers' Foreword, the idea of economic development is conflated with ideas about economic participation, economic inclusion and economic self-reliance. Furthermore, there is reference to the prime ministerial Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples in February 2008 (where the Closing the Gap statistical framework was first introduced without consultation with Indigenous people) and Australia's subsequent endorsement of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in April 2009 (p.iii). At articles 18–24 the Declaration highlights the right of Indigenous Peoples to control the nature of development, including the right to decide how economic development occurs.

Third, in April 2004, Power and Associates prepared an Indigenous Economic Development Policy framework for the Ministerial Council on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (MCATSIA). Indigenous economic development was defined as a process of enhancing opportunities to maximise the potential of Indigenous people to increase their wealth and wellbeing. This focus on economic development as a social process whereby people as individuals, but more commonly as various social groupings, improve their wellbeing by enjoying diverse and robust economic options needs serious consideration. It also needs to be contrasted with the Draft Strategy's primary focus on what I term a 'Closing the Gap Plus' approach.

MCATSIA:

Ministerial Council
on Aboriginal
and Torres Strait
Islander Affairs

Recommendation 1: The Draft Strategy is somewhat inconsistent in its use of the term 'economic development' but appears to favour a view that accords with the modernisation paradigm. In this paradigm, the Indigenous development problem is defined using a statistical deficits model, promoting a strategy to close gaps based on a mainstreaming or 'normalisation' approach. Such an approach has been challenged in a long trajectory of published research, especially by dependency, post development and 'alternatives to development' theories. The Draft Strategy needs to more fully explore the meanings of 'economic development' from a diversity of perspectives and canvass options beyond the 'Closing the Gap Plus' approach. In particular, consideration should be given to build on the approach of economic development as social process to enhance capacity to improve wellbeing.

2. ECONOMIC HYBRIDITY AND INTERCULTURALITY

Since 2001 I have used a framework I term 'the hybrid economy' in an attempt to highlight three things. First, in many situations, especially in regional and remote Australia, customary (non-market) productive activity continues to make a significant contribution to livelihood. Second, the customary is often closely inter-linked with market and state or private and public sectors. And third, kin-based relations of production continue to have influence in the customary sector.

In 2003, I made a presentation to the Ministerial Council on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs highlighting the existence of a robust customary sector in many situations. For many Indigenous Australians the economy is far more complicated than most policy makers can imagine: choices that individuals face

and make are not just limited to private or public sector employment, or work or welfare—there is also the choice to engage in the customary sector often living at remote homelands/outstations. Participation in customary activity can improve livelihoods directly via self-provisioning. But it can also have a significant indirect impact because Indigenous and local knowledge is incubated and reproduced in the customary sector. This knowledge forms key human capital specialities in sectors such as the arts and natural and cultural resource management. These are important components of hybrid economies that generate income and livelihood from private and public sector engagements.

While I have principally applied the notion of economic hybridity in my work in regional and remote Australia, it also has applicability in more densely settled regions of Australia; for example, its applicability has been demonstrated in New South Wales. A crucial element of this model is its acknowledgement that Indigenous economic decision making is influenced by a mix of western, individualistic and market-based norms on one hand and Indigenous, group and kin-based norms on the other. Anthropologists increasingly refer to this mix of norms in terms of interculturality—norms influenced by Indigenous and western ways of living. In many situations there are tensions between kin-based and market based economic norms.

The Draft Strategy recognises that there are areas of Indigenous competitive advantage (p.7) that are generated by 'traditional and cultural knowledge'. While drawing on David Ricardo's theory of comparative advantage that constitutes the founding principle of neoliberal globalisation, the Draft Strategy does not then apply the logic of this theory—that people should engage in productive activity in which they are relatively efficient—to the customary sector and hybrid economy. All the strategic priorities in the Draft Strategy focus on mainstream engagement, erroneously assuming the uncontested adoption of western norms and the wholesale abandonment of distinct, but highly diverse, Indigenous (non-western) norms, will deliver development.

Recommendation 2: The Draft Strategy uses the theory of comparative advantage without properly recognising the potential of custom-based productive activity to improve wellbeing; and the complex inter-linkages between customary, market and state sectors in situations of economic hybridity. Cultural production matters for economic development. Any economic development strategy for Indigenous Australians needs to recognise the diverse forms of contemporary Indigenous economies and the intercultural mix of western and Indigenous norms that inform economic decision-making. To do otherwise is to neglect empirical reality.

3. TARGETING DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE

The Draft Strategy struggles to address the difficult issue of how development assistance will be provided to Indigenous Australians. Throughout the Strategy there is reference to targeting Indigenous Australians and a recognition that support can be provided to individuals, businesses and communities. But the highly problematic issue of how to effectively target development assistance is only discussed in somewhat abstract terms. And while there is a neat division between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, this is a falsely bifurcated, rather than realistically intercultural, world. In line with current policy influenced by neoliberal principles, the emphasis in the Draft Strategy is predominantly on individuals.

At one level this emphasis on individuals makes sense because the majority of Indigenous Australians live in urban and metropolitan situations where there is a high degree of ethnic and residential integration, people often live in mixed households in neighbourhoods that include Indigenous and other Australians. The Draft Strategy needs to acknowledge that actually locating Indigenous people in need of development assistance in many situations where Indigenous people are most populous (e.g. in Sydney), yet constitute a miniscule and barely visible component of the total population, is extraordinarily challenging.

The conceptual basis of the post-war emergence of the academic field of economic development has its origins in targeting assistance to the rural sector in the Third World. It is an approach that might be applicable to discrete Indigenous communities mainly located in regional and remote Australia. The latest ABS statistics indicate that there are over 1,000 discrete Indigenous communities with a total population estimated at about 100,000 or about 20 per cent of the total Indigenous population. While the term Indigenous community implies that populations are Indigenous only, in reality many and especially the larger townships with populations over 500 have other Australian residents.

I make two key points here.

First, the Draft Strategy, like the Closing the Gap policy framework, creates a statistical and conceptual distinction between Indigenous and other Australians that poorly reflects social and economic reality. Just as Indigenous people live interculturally, they also often live inter-ethnically, in mixed communities and in mixed households, as well as in small and remote communities mainly or solely populated by Indigenous people.

Second, the Draft Strategy assumes that the Australian state can effectively target development assistance to Indigenous individuals without the mediating support of community-controlled and community-based organisations. Paradoxically perhaps if development assistance is to be provided in urban and metropolitan situations such mediating organisations will be crucially important in locating Indigenous people—often their members or constituents—for development assistance. The Australian state needs to empower and resource such organisations that will be crucially important for the delivery of economic development assistance.

Recommendation 3: The Draft Strategy needs to more clearly address the complexity of Indigenous demographic and residential social reality and the challenges that this presents to effective targeting of economic development assistance. Special attention needs to be paid to the mediation role, between Indigenous people and the state, provided by community-based organisations and the need for these organisations to be strengthened by state policy.

4. POLICY AND PROGRAM HISTORY

The Draft Strategy's historical perspective only goes back to Kevin Rudd's Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples in February 2008. This date also marks the start of the Closing the Gap policy framework. And so the Draft Strategy represents an approach lacking adequate policy or program history. It is impossible to establish an economic development strategy for the present and future if there is no engagement or understanding of the past; and an acknowledgement of deep economic development policy failure.

It is not possible to review all past policies and programs here. I merely wish to briefly note the two policy reviews previously mentioned.

The first is the comprehensive review of Aboriginal employment and training programs undertaken by a committee and secretariat over a period of nearly 12 months, chaired by the late Mick Miller, and completed for the Hawke government in 1985. The Miller Committee produced a 450 page report and its deliberations represent the first and last time that this issue has received serious attention in Australian public policy making some 25 years ago now. I partly highlight this review because of its focus on economic development in a variety of Indigenous geographic contexts and its overarching recommendations to the Australian government to invest in the building of an economic base for development especially in rural and remote situations. The recommendations of the Miller Report were partially implemented in the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP) from 1987. The AEDP has the overarching goal of employment and educational statistical equality between Indigenous and other Australians by the year 2000.

AEDP:

Aboriginal
Employment
Development
Policy

The second is the Indigenous Economic Development Policy Framework developed by Power and Associates for the MCATSI Steering Committee in 2004. This framework was completed for the Howard government under its broad policy umbrella of practical reconciliation. This policy framework has some similarities to the Draft Strategy reflecting in part the similarity in broad policy approach of the Howard and the Rudd/Gillard years.

I highlight these two earlier documents primarily because both sought to address the contested notion of economic development. It is important in the formation of a new Strategy to consider policy-making history and more importantly to ask why is it that past approaches failed to deliver development? What lessons can be learnt from the past? Part of the answer I would suggest is that the Australian government made insufficient commitment and investment to implement the forms of community-based participatory development that both earlier approaches advocated.

A similar observation can be made with respect to a wide range of economic development programs that have been implemented in recent years. I do not aim to comprehensively outline these programs here, but merely to note that some have been successful in enabling forms of economic development (especially in the broad sense of improved livelihood) and others have failed. I will however highlight one flexible program, the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme that facilitated economic and community development in a diversity of situations ranging from the metropolitan to the very remote. This program is in the process of being 'reformed' without its role in facilitating economic development, in an extremely cost-effective way, being properly assessed.

CDEP:
Community
Development
Employment
Projects

Recommendation 4: The Draft Strategy makes no reference to past economic development policies and programs. It is imperative that any new Indigenous Economic Development Strategy seriously engages with past policy reviews and analyses the successes and failures of the past.

5. STRUCTURAL POLITICO-ECONOMIC FACTORS

In accord with the currently dominant policy and popular discourse of Closing the Gap, the Draft Strategy promotes the view that socio-economic sameness is possible for Indigenous and other Australians. At the same time the historical reasons for Indigenous economic marginality encapsulated within a rich nation state are overlooked. This broad approach overlooks the structural politico-economic basis for inequality and instead adopts the view that it is excessive reliance on welfare and the maladaptation of Indigenous cultures to modernity that are at the heart of the economic development problem. The Draft Strategy does not discuss causal factors, like state neglect, capitalist exploitation and asymmetric power relations as explanators of marginalisation. It merely suggests that if mainstream approaches to development are replicated, benefit will trickle down to Indigenous people in need.

Tania Murray Li in *The Will To Improve* (2008) notes (researching in Sulawesi) that by rendering economic development problems technical, and amenable to technical solutions, improvement projects fail to acknowledge that poverty is a symptom of powerlessness and hence fail to address politico-economic relationships, the structural sources of inequality and their historical evolution.

This issue can be briefly demonstrated with reference to property rights. The Draft Strategy notes that land holdings and associated resources constitute unique areas of competitive advantage for Indigenous Australians (p.7). Land rights and native title laws have seen an estimated 1.7 million sq kms returned to Indigenous people, but almost all this land is in very remote Australia. And except in the Northern Territory where free prior informed consent rights constitute a form of de facto property right, elsewhere only customary rather than commercial property rights are guaranteed. It could be readily argued that prospects for economic development would be greatly enhanced if property rights in commercially

valuable resources, as well as in real estate, were provided. This is the issue that is at the heart of the current debate over Wild Rivers laws in Queensland. It is also an issue that is highlighted in articles 25–32 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples that refer to rights to country and resources.

At the same time the restricted common property regimes that characterise most Indigenous land tenure and that can be distinguished from individuated private property offer unique opportunity in the provision of environmental services. It is this form of land tenure that is seeing more and more of the Indigenous estate incorporated in the Australian National Reserve System. There are economic changes underway in regional and remote Australia that Professor John Holmes terms multifunctional transitions that are seeing shifts from production (mineral extraction and commercial agriculture) to more environmentally benign consumption and conservation industries. There are possibilities here for innovative economic development that the Draft Strategy should highlight.

Recommendation 5: Consideration needs to be given to strengthening Indigenous property rights in commercial valuable resources so as to address economic and power imbalances. At the same time the comparative advantages afforded by restricted common property land ownership regimes, physical and human assets, need to be recognised and supported. Development prospects that reflect structural economic changes already underway need to be properly considered to ensure innovative approaches.

6. THE PROPER ROLE OF THE STATE

Indigenous economic development is in urgent need of proper state support. The Draft Strategy notes what it terms 'Strengthening the Foundations' as a strategic priority. This requirement cannot be questioned. In the past the state (the aggregation of Commonwealth and State and Territory political and bureaucratic processes) has failed Indigenous Australia and this situation needs urgent rectification. There is no question that this is now recognised, especially in a series of National Partnership Agreements that form the National Indigenous Reform Agreement signed off by the Council of Australian Governments. Questions might be asked about whether enough is being done or whether the targeting of a relatively small number of larger communities is appropriate, but the broad principle that rapid catch-up is required is universally accepted.

The Australian government needs to get the institutional arrangements properly set to enable development. This can occur in three broad ways. First, the foundations of health, housing, educational, communications and other infrastructural services need to be provided. Second, legal frameworks need to be streamlined so that property rights regimes are both beneficial and consistent across the nation. At present there are considerable interstate inequities and inconsistencies most evident in the diversity of land rights and native title laws. And third, the state needs to identify and support what works in terms of targeted development assistance. While I will not go into detail here there is no shortage of documentation about successful enterprises with common features being community initiative, expert management, sound governance, state assistance provided at arms-length, and market niches generally based on comparative advantage.

I am not going to comment on the proper relationships between the state and Indigenous citizens here, except to note that when these become marked by excessive political struggle the possibility for economic development is limited. It is important though that the Australian government focuses on its area of expertise, the delivery of public services, rather than on areas where it has limited capacity to deliver, such as directing the private sector or Aboriginal community sector. The state should focus on the effective delivery of its processes because it is here that it can be and should be held accountable for its performance. In setting policy goals the state should retain a high degree of realism rather than promoting discourses of admirable equality that might prove unachievable: Murray Edelman's warning about 'Words that succeed and policies that fail' should guide the Indigenous Economic Development Strategy.

Recommendation 6: In the formation of the Indigenous Economic Development Strategy it is imperative that the state focuses its efforts on getting the institutional settings right for economic development in all its diverse forms. The limit to the state's ability to drive either private sector or community action needs to be recognised.

7. POLICY-MAKING PROCESSES

Participation and economic empowerment are viewed in the Draft Strategy as resulting automatically from mainstream education and employment or business success, individualism, home ownership and accumulation in a manner that mirrors the processes and social norms of the dominant society. But the fact that empowerment by such a predetermined pathway is itself a relationship of power and one that might not accord with the aspirations of the subjects of such economic development programs is overlooked. An assumption is being made that Indigenous Australians ascribe to the mainstreaming development goals of the state as defined in the Closing the Gap framework; and that they lack aspirations and agency to pursue alternate forms of livelihood from those imagined for them by the Australian government in the mainstream.

In recent years the politics of policy reform have become increasingly fraught. Policy reform processes are especially difficult in the area of economic development where they need to be participatory and bottom up and in Indigenous affairs where they need to be highly consultative. The problem of consultation has been greatly exacerbated in the past six years since the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, an elected representative body with national and regional wings.

The Rudd government made a commitment to a new approach to economic development and then charged the appropriate area in the bureaucracy, the Indigenous Economic Development Branch within FaHCSIA, with the very difficult policy development task. This task has been largely undertaken in Canberra constrained by the Rudd and now Gillard governments predetermined commitment to the Closing the Gap framework, a series of five strategies that clearly articulate what is referred to as 'our' priorities (referring presumably to the Australian government) and an existing Action Plan 2010–2012.

The Draft Strategy has been out for comment for some seven months now and a number of consultations have been conducted with stakeholders mainly in State and Territory capital cities. A problem is that the Australian government has set the parameters for the Strategy without appropriate input from Indigenous people. Unfortunately, the call for written submission is unlikely to elicit responses from Indigenous people, especially those living in the most remote and difficult circumstances, owing to cynicism about the process. Other forms of constructive engagement with Indigenous Australians are urgently needed.

And while the policy-making process is not yet completed, the means whereby public submissions might influence policy refinement are unclear. In my view, such an approach to policy making is inappropriate and unlikely to result in the shaping of a policy framework that will actually deliver on its articulated goals, in this case economic development. This is especially the case in the very difficult area of economic development where there has been a high level of state failure to deliver and where both national and international precedents indicate that a participatory and bottom up approach is needed if sustainable development outcomes are to result from state interventions and investments.

Recommendation 7: In addition to the opening recommendation 1 that diverse Indigenous views on economic development are considered, it is also important that the current diversity of Indigenous circumstances and economic development possibilities be assessed. A mechanism is needed to ensure constructive engagement by Indigenous communities with the Draft Strategy from inception rather than at completion.

8. CONCLUSION AND FINAL RECOMMENDATION

The Draft Strategy articulates an Australian government view that Indigenous Australians have a right to economic sameness that the state cannot deliver, while ignoring the right of Indigenous people to be different, something the state could enable. The latter strategy would mean that the Closing the Gap statistical goals promulgated by the Rudd and now Gillard governments might not be met. But the basic human rights of Indigenous people to choose the form that development might take as articulated in a number of articles in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (supported by the Australian government in April 2009) might be.

Indigenous economic development, however defined, is not just a technical problem that requires a technical solution. It is a political economy and policy formation problem that needs to be addressed from the community level up. This in turn will require a great deal of hard policy development work. A theoretical, abstract, and somewhat reductionist strategy for development is being proposed because those charged with the policy formulation process do not have the means to engage with the empirical reality of communities and regions; or with the inevitable wide range of aspirations that Indigenous people will hold.

Under these circumstances and because the Australian government inevitably acts in its own interests, it might be appropriate to establish a parliamentary inquiry into Indigenous economic development. In such an inquiry, the Draft Strategy could form the Australian government submission to the policy development process. In my view the issue of Indigenous economic development is so important that it requires the multi-partisan attention of the most transparent institution available in Australia in a fraught policy environment where the boundaries between politicians, the bureaucracy and business are becoming increasingly blurred. A proper parliamentary inquiry might enable a higher level of Indigenous participation from the outset and might also invite submission from international expertise. The approach of a parliamentary inquiry includes community visitation and taking of verbal evidence that allows a high degree of direct consultations with Indigenous people.

Recommendation 8: A parliamentary inquiry should be established as soon as possible to examine the issue of Indigenous economic development in Australia with the aim of making recommendations for the establishment of a new and comprehensive policy framework.